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SUBJECT: SIERRA LEONE: CHINESE ENGAGEMENT

REF: STATE 010152

¶1. This message responds to reftel request for information on Chinese engagement in Sierra Leone and potential areas for cooperation. Post opted for a front channel cable as well as an email in light of the significant interest in the level of Chinese engagement in Sierra Leone.

¶2. China was significantly involved in Sierra Leone prior to the strife of 1991-2001 and has recently begun to re-engage. The older phase coincided with the regime of Siaka Stevens, who subscribed to the leftist-socialist and non-aligned trends of the time. Many of the large structures that continue to dominate Freetown were built by the Chinese in the 1970's and 80's: the National Stadium, the Youyi ("friendship" in Chinese) Ministerial Complex, the army headquarters, the police headquarters, and the China-Sierra Leone Friendship House. Upcountry, the Chinese built bridges linking Guinea and Sierra Leone, a demonstration rice plantation and sugar complex near Makeni, and a hydroelectric dam near Kenema with power transmission lines.

¶3. The recent phase of engagement was highlighted by the Chinese Foreign Minister's visit January 13-14, a reciprocation of President Koroma's visit to China in 2009. The Chinese have undertaken to restore, revamp, or remodel some of the old projects, to include the National Stadium, the Youyi Ministerial Complex, the army headquarters, and the rice plantation and sugar complex. They have resurfaced the formerly deplorable roads from Bo to Kenema and from Makeni to Matotoka. They are building a 100-bed hospital on the outskirts of Freetown at Kossoh (which should become Freetown's best hospital) and will resurface the now execrable road from the new American Embassy over the mountain to Grafton/Kossoh, which will help somewhat to relieve the extraordinary traffic pile-up in eastern Freetown. They have also committed to a much-needed new Foreign Ministry building near the parliament, as well as additional offices at parliament. While here, the Chinese Foreign Minister presided over the opening of a new elementary school in Freetown. The Chinese are building a small stadium at Bo and will build another at Makeni. The Chinese government has instituted what its embassy describes as a volunteer program similar to the Peace Corps, and Chinese diplomats tell us that 30 volunteers recently arrived and are working in Freetown in various activities from the health sector to martial arts. (Medical challenges upcountry have prevented the embassy so far from sending any volunteers outside the capital).

¶4. As part of the government's privatization program, Gouji Trading Company has taken over the huge former railway workshop in eastern Freetown (which housed one of the largest IDP camps during the war) and made it into a manufacturing complex assembling an array of large machines and much else from mattresses to construction materials. Chinese companies have established health centers, cell-phone repair shops, and hair-product and clothing businesses. The Chinese have formed partnerships with Sierra Leoneans to exploit Sierra Leonean fish resources (which are fast dwindling). A Chinese

company is reported to have invested heavily in the iron-ore company African Minerals (rebuilding the ore-export port at Pepel and a railway-Septel), although the Chinese Embassy denies that such a deal has been finalized.

15. Press reports and rumors during the Chinese Foreign Minister's visit centered on a new airport for Freetown, perhaps at the landward end of the Freetown Peninsula, but the Chinese Embassy has clarified that at this juncture the Sierra Leonean government has simply made a request. China has made no commitment other than to take the matter under serious consideration. Chinese diplomats tell us that China might be willing to be one of several partners in the airport project.

16. Collaboration with China, especially with infrastructure projects, would require a significant change in the focus and budgets of our own assistance approach to Sierra Leone. Peacekeeping offers an opportunity, with Chinese equipment and training complementing US and EU sources. If China's volunteer program closely resembles the Peace Corps, another possibility would be to assign volunteers from both programs to work together on shared projects, such as providing teachers in tandem to the same rural schools.

FEDZER